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## THE FRAMEWORK OF CENTRAL AFRICAN HUNTER-GATHERERS AND NEIGHBOURING SOCIETIES

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**ABSTRACT** This article presents a synthesis of available information about the framework of relations between Pygmy peoples and neighbouring local communities called “villagers” or “farmers.” From an epistemological point of view, the literature is more detailed about the origin of that relationship than about the analysis of its framework. From an ethnographic viewpoint, a comparison of the two most researched case studies in different cultural settings provides evidence of the existence of a similar relational interethnic model in the Congo River basin. This model involves both aspects of the “ideology of solidarity,” sustained by links of pseudo-kinship, and of the “ideology of domination,” political-economic dominance over the Pygmy peoples by the “villagers.” The relationship also appears fluid in that it allows a multiplicity of partnerships. The interethnic relational model suits an environment of mobility and of acephalous political organization. The author argues that the model is not specific to hunter-gatherer societies, nor to Pygmy communities in general, but rather to Pygmy groups in regular contact with villager communities characterised by mobility and non-hierarchical political organization.

**Key Words:** Pygmies; Non-Pygmy neighbors; Inter-ethnic relations; Hunter-gatherers; Central Africa; Pseudo-kinship; Subordination

### INTRODUCTION

The Congo River basin in Central Africa contains a myriad of communities composed of Pygmy peoples on the one hand, and a mixture of so called villagers or “farmers” on the other. The two groups are culturally and historically distinct, even though they often live in geographic proximity and engage in frequent exchanges - material, ritual and symbolic - following a complex relational model that practically excludes matrimonial alliances. This interethnic relationship is unique as well as essentially different from pre-colonial relations between patron-client and patron-captive.

The Pygmies call the entity of villagers by different generic terms such as *kaka* in south-eastern Cameroon (Joiris, 1998a; 1998b; Rupp, 2001) or *bilo* in northern Congo-Brazzaville (Lewis, 2002a; 2002b) and also use specific ethnic names. As for the villagers, they refer to Pygmies as “Pygmées” in French and use various ethnic names as well. On both sides, generic terms for villagers and “Pygmies” reflect a clear separation between the two social entities and coloured by pejorative connotations. The term “villagers” is mostly used with contempt and a “Pygmée” is associated with inferior beings, savages, or thieves, albeit gifted with potentially supernatural powers. Several authors have documented such descriptions of Pygmies: the Bacwa (Kazadi, 1981), the Aka (Bahuchet &

Guillaume, 1979; 1982; Bahuchet, 1989: 585) or the Mbendjele (Lewis, 2002a; 2002b, Kohler & Lewis 2002) as well as, for example, relations of inequality between the Efe and neighbouring villagers (Grinker, 1989, 1990, 1994).

Ethnolinguistic, ethnohistorical and genetical data clearly demonstrate that the relationship between Pygmies and villagers dates back a long time. All over the Congo basin, Pygmies and villagers have had regular contact while maintaining their proper identity. The research undertaken by Cavalli-Sforza (1986) at the regional level demonstrates that Pygmies are genetically close to their neighbours. Lexical evidence shows for example that earlier contacts existed dating from the time of the proto-baakaa civilisation, the ancestors of the Baka and the Aka Pygmies (Bahuchet, 1993). "Linguistic similarities found between Aka and villagers, combined with a long process of differentiation, confirms the idea that early contacts cannot be reduced to simple irregular exchanges of material goods, as language is not adopted in a short time." (Bahuchet & Guillaume, 1979: 113)

Nevertheless, we know very little about the interethnic relations, beyond the fact that Pygmies have village "owners" and that they practice material as well as ritual exchanges (funeral, circumcision, etc). In the Sangha region, for instance, Demesse (1978), citing testimonies from the beginning of the century, underlines the practice of blood pacts, but no analysis was made. The exact nature of the relations established between the two communities is rarely specified. Except for Delobea (1978; 1989), who clearly defines the relationship between the Monzombo and the Aka Pygmies (Yadenga) of Middle Oubangui, most French-speaking authors use terms such as *partenariat*, *clientélisme* (clientage) and *propriété* (ownership). In English, it is often described as: symbiotic relationship (Terashima, 1986) or friendship, peer friendship, clientage, as well as, particularly by Grinker (1989), long-term trade relationship and trading partners, without further specification of the nature of the relationship. Thus, the analysis of interethnic relations resulting from exchanges, although well documented, remains incomplete in the above publications. Material, ritual and symbolic exchanges are often described (see for example Hanawa, 1998; Hart, 1979; Hart & Hart, 1984; Schultz, 1986; 1991; Takeuchi, 1998; Tilquin n.d.), as well as stereotype construction and strategies to obtain advantages from the other group (see for instance Lewis, 2002a; 2002b) but the framework of those interethnic relations is not analysed. In other words, scholars emphasize more how people act within the interethnic network than how the latter is effectively structured.

Literature about the region clearly indicates the existence of a specific relationship between Pygmy communities and neighbouring farmers. However, the structure of these interethnic relations in particular, remains a mystery and information is patchy. The gap is probably the result of a scientific tradition focusing on the study of Pygmy and villager communities separately as if they are not part of the same reality; a limited number of case studies; a confusion of two separate issues, the mostly superficial description of the framework of interethnic relations (though interethnic relations are described in some details), and the interpretation of the origin of these relations documented in detail.

The aim of this paper is to provide a comparative assessment of the relationship between Pygmies and villagers in the Congo River basin. In addition, a regional model will be presented that could apply to all the Pygmy groups in contact with specific type of neighbouring communities. The first part of the paper is dedicated to a synthetic presentation of a framework of interethnic relations, mostly through case studies from south-east Cameroon (Baka Pygmies) and from the Ituri region (Mbuti/Efe Pygmies, Democratic

Republic of Congo). The second part focuses on different interpretations about the origin of interethnic relations. I will show that a socio-political interpretation deals with the ambivalent model based on solidarity AND domination. I will also argue that other interpretations, ideological, economic and ecological, more specifically focus on aspects of subordination in interethnic relationships.

## CHARACTERISTICS OF INTERETHNIC RELATIONSHIPS

### I. The Aspect of Solidarity

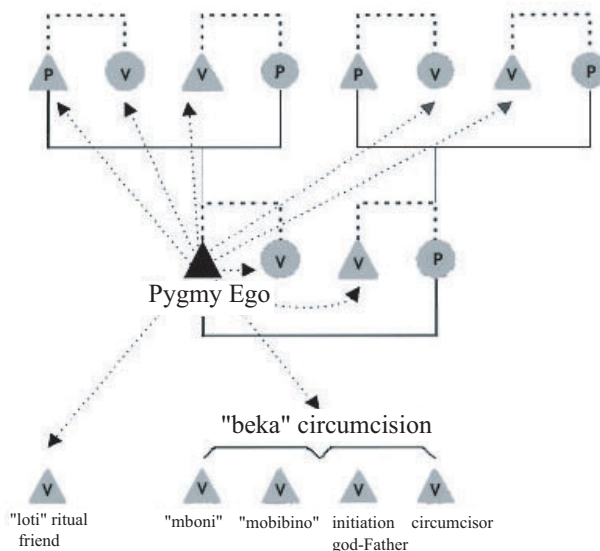
In this section it is argued that, at regional level, relations between Pygmies and villagers include both a social dimension based on pseudo-kinship bonds, and a political dimension based on subordination of Pygmies to villagers. Hence, interethnic relations are the outcome of a model reflecting both of the ideology of solidarity and that of domination. The term ideology is used here to mean “system of ideas and representation” in the historical materialism sense. In this way, according to Godelier (1984) the *idéel* is a total social reality and it serves as an internal structuring mechanism to regulate human relations. This contrasts with the Marxist concept whereby ideology justifies social order. Let us first discuss about the aspects of solidarity.

The fact that the bonds between Pygmy and villager communities at a regional level are of a pseudo-kinship kind still needs to be investigated. Nevertheless, numerous references in available literature and case studies about two different Pygmy groups (i.e. the Baka of Cameroon and the Mbuti/Efe of Democratic Republic of Congo), clearly reveal that pseudo-kinship bonds are common and widespread and produce similar relations and social functions in various environments.

#### 1. *Case study of the Baka in southeast Cameroon*

The interethnic relational model of the Baka in East Cameroon is complex (Joiris, 1998a, 1998b; Rupp, 2001) and based on a combination of three types of alliances: pseudo-kinship bond, “friendship” bond, solidarity bond through initiation. According to this model, a Pygmy (a male Ego, for example) can establish privileged links with eleven villagers: i) six through pseudo-kinship bonds, ii) one through “friendship” and iii) four through ritual solidarity (see Fig. 1). These three alliances are referred to by Pygmies and villagers as kinship bonds, or even “bonds that are stronger than kinship.” Although they can be genuinely affective relations, they should be considered as a series of social and mutual obligations. The process needed to establish the relationship, the persons associated with it and its social functions are different from one bond to another (see Table 1). The principle social function is solidarity and mutual aid (regular exchanges of goods and services) and the parties concerned cannot marry nor enter into conflict.

Within each community as well as between Pygmy and villager communities, special relations are created that include widely extended intra- and interethnic dimensions. While not being secret, they constitute a reality which is not openly talked about and exists in addition to “normal” kinship ties (a kind of Omaha system for both the Pygmy and farmer communities, including the Kwele, Konabembe, Bangando and Mbomam). Most of the

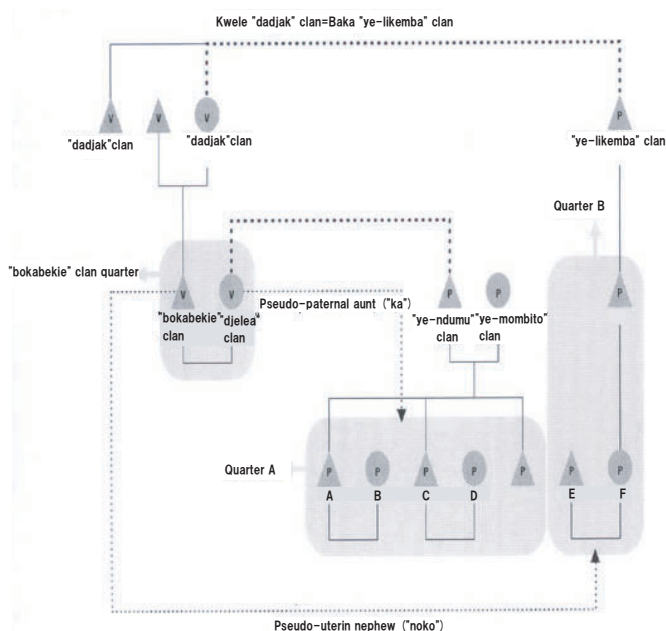


**Fig. 1.** The interethnic relational model in East Cameroon.

**Table 1.** Social functions of the interethnic bonds (Baka Pygmies-Kwele, Konabembe, Bangando, Mbomam farmers; Southeast Cameroon)

Types of Bond	Processes establishing the bond	Persons associated
<b>Pseudo-Kinship</b>	Virtual concordance between the pygmy and villager clans - Blood pact	Siblings of opposite sex
<b>Ritual Friendship</b>	Material exchange of goods and services without any specific ceremony	Two persons of the same sex
<b>Ritual Solidarity (<i>beka</i> circumcision)</b>	Initiation (circumcision)	Adult men

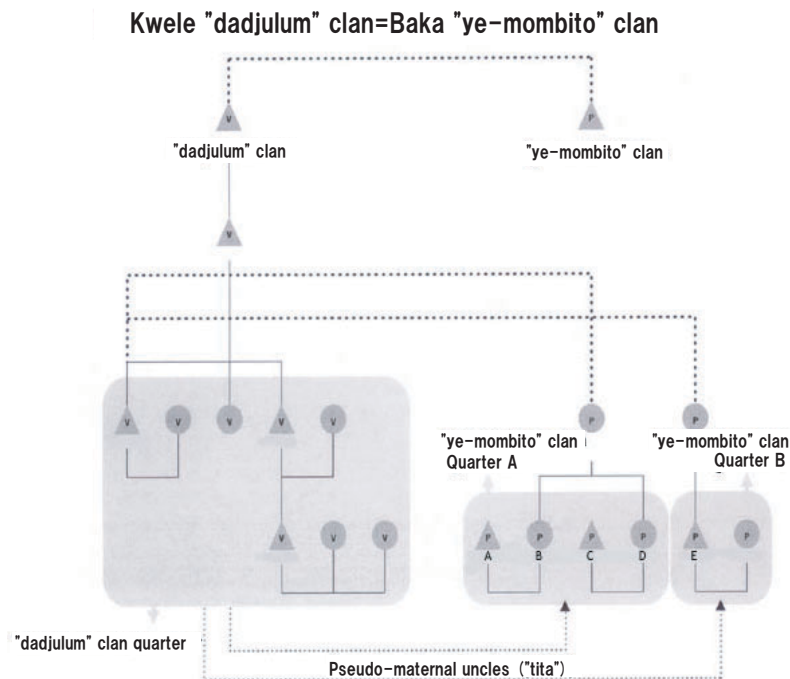
time, the initial bond is reinforced by others and extended to the descendants and/or household members of the protagonists (see Fig. 4 and 5 concerning more specifically pseudo-kinship bonds). High individual and family mobility in both communities does not hinder the system. On the contrary, it mostly benefits from such mobility. In fact, when a Pygmy moves from his own camp to his family-in-law's or another camp where he stays for a "visit," he is automatically included in close relationships with other villagers/neighbours who are directly or indirectly linked to the original model.



**Fig. 2.** Pseudo-kinship relationship between two Baka Pygmy households - respectively included in quarter A and B of the Baka Pygmy camp - and two Kwele villager households - respectively included in the “Dadjulum” clan quarter and in the “Bokabekie” clan quarter of the Kwele village? South East Cameroon.

**Pseudo-kinship bond** The Baka Pygmies and neighbouring villagers maintain pseudo-kinship relations, which are supported by a specific bond between pseudo-siblings of the opposite sex, for example, between a Baka pseudo-brother and a villager pseudo-sister. The bond includes two potential partners of the Ego generation, but can also function simultaneously at the level of the Ego’s first ascending generation where it includes four supplementary potential partners. Within the generation of a male Ego, the pseudo-kinship link creates a relationship between pseudo-brother and sister and one between pseudo-brothers-in-law. A male Ego, with reference to generation +1, will create three supplementary types of pseudo-kinship relations: between nephew and paternal aunt, between uterine nephew and maternal uncle as well as between son-in-law and his family-in-law.

As mentioned above, the interethnic pseudo-kinship bond concerns not only the protagonists but also other members and their respective residential groups (households, camp or village neighbourhoods). The examples of Fig. 2 and Fig. 3, illustrates residential groups of Pygmy and villager pseudo-siblings. In Fig. 2, the male Pygmy Ego consider all the members of the village as “his uterine nephews.” This example shows that, within the pseudo-kinship framework, the Pygmy entity may be dominating, not only dominated (this is not the case of a Pygmy entity in the position of an uterine nephew as shown in Fig. 3).



**Fig. 3.** (see caption of Fig. 2)

**Ritual friendship** In addition to pseudo-kinship relations, another type of bond exists which unites Pygmies and villagers: friendship between two persons of the same sex; between a female villager and a Pygmy woman or between a male villager and a Pygmy man.

Such a bond (*loti* in Baka, *eso* in Kwele) is established during childhood or adolescence between two persons who mutually choose a partner and truly appreciate to each other. Exchanges of goods and services (even exchanging wife swapping), on both sides, seals this friendship. This bond continues into adulthood as long as the partners are not separated by life's (mis)fortunes (leaving the area following marriage, divorce, etc).

**Solidarity through initiation** Finally, interethnic ties are established through ritual solidarity. Available data about the *beka* circumcision society (villagers), for example, show that an initiated Pygmy, a male Ego, maintains privileged ritual relationships with four types of villagers: the co-initiate, the person who fed him during his period of seclusion, his initiation god-father and the circumcisor (see Table reftable2).

Creation of such bonds is not limited to the *beka* circumcision society but also apply to other ritual societies such as the Baka's *jengi*, and probably to female ritual societies in the villages as well.

**Table 2.** Exchanges through ritual bonds between the initiate and four others within the *beka* society.

Categories of <i>beka</i> initiates	Types of relationship between the initiate and <i>beka</i> members
Initiate of the same circumcision group ( <i>mboni/loti</i> )	Solidarity, exchange of goods and services; Conflicts and the exchange of wives are forbidden
The person who nourishes the initiate during his seclusion ( <i>mobibino</i> ) and his wife	Undertaking of a plantation or hunting; Mutual assistance within a relationship that is almost filial; Obligation to render service
Circumcisor ( <i>njil</i> )	Friendship: <i>eso</i> (Kwele), <i>ndeko</i> (Baka - Lingala), <i>dimbai</i> (Bangando); Blood brothers (blood pact)
Guardian, initiation god-father, the person who introduces the initiate into the <i>beka</i>	Pseudo-kin or previous ritual friend

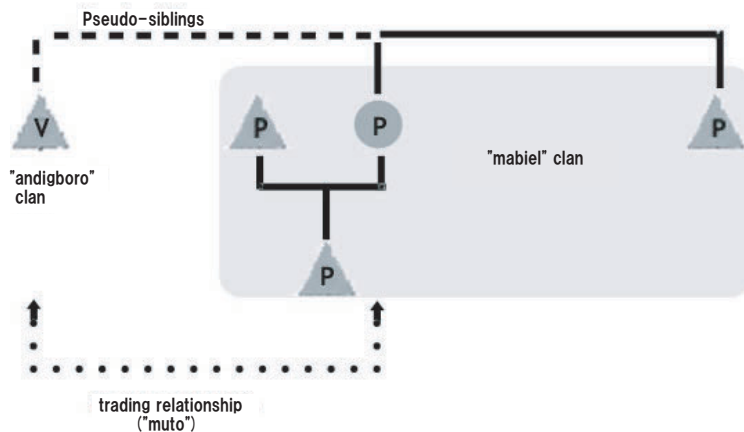
## 2. Case study of the Mbuti/Efe Pygmies in the Ituri region (DRC)

Interethnic alliances based on pseudo-kinship bonds have also been identified and described for the Mbuti Pygmies and the Bira villagers (Hart, 1978; Ichikawa, 1982; 1991a; 1991b) and for the Efe Pygmies and the Lese villagers (Terashima, 1986; 1987; 1998; Grinker, 1989). Their interethnic relational model is based on a combination of two kinds of bonds (not three as in the case of the Baka, although also ritual solidarity bonds exist). The first, between inherited partners, is defined, like with the Baka, as “something like kinship bonds.” Bonds of kinship are created to establish relations between Pygmy and villagers. The second is established between temporary partners, based on a friendly relationship, possibly leading to a more regular form of partnership and supplementary to interethnic pseudo-kinship relationships. An Efe or Mbuti Pygmy may have more than one privileged village partner.

**Pseudo-common family** No comparable case studies have been conducted about the relationships in Ituri. However, available data seem to indicate that a similar interethnic system is operational. Grinker (1989) highlights accession of Efe Pygmies and Lese villagers to clans or phratries as commons at an *emic* level. As with the Baka, the importance of pseudo-sibling relationships between the Efe and Lese of the opposite sex is highlighted, and such a relationship extends to the descendants of a Lese clan or phratry considered as ‘maternal uncle’ and an Efe clan or phratry considered as ‘uterine nephew’. In this case, says Grinker, “phratry solidarity between Efe and Lese, becomes more important than ethnic solidarity” (Grinker, 1989: 229).

If we consider the *efe maia-muto maia* exchange system as a pseudo-kinship relationship, then other similarities between Baka and Efe Pygmies can also be found. In south-east Cameroon and in the Ituri region of the DRC, hereditary transfer of the bonds and endogamy of the system are prescribed. Cases of inheritance (from a villager to a Baka) and of adoption (of an Efe by a villager) could be considered as variations of a similar model. Terashima (1986; 1987; 1998) describes the Efe-Lese exchange system, which is considered symbiotic from an economic point of view as it is based on two complementary





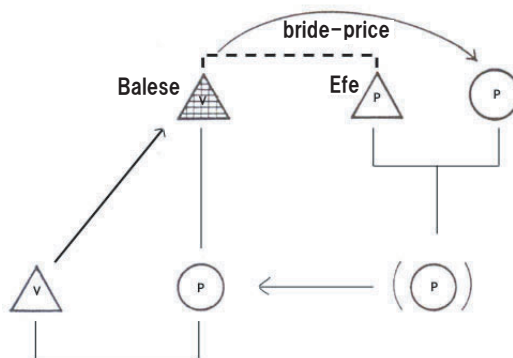
**Fig. 4.** Pseudo-kinship relations between an Efe and a Lese clan in northeastern DRC (Grinker, 1989)



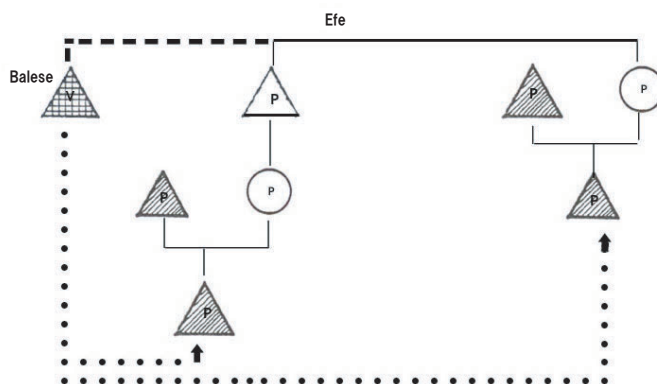
**Fig. 5.** The hereditary transference of the 'efe maia-muto maia' relationship in the northeast of the Democratic Republic of Congo (Terashima, 1986).

interethnic bonds associated with specific categories of goods and services. The first type of bond ('efe maia-muto maia exchange system') is established between regular partners called *muto maia* ('my villager') and *efe maia* ('my Pygmy'). This *efe maia-muto maia* relationship involves regular reciprocal exchanges of goods and services. These may last a lifetime or be transmitted from father to son, and extend to both patrilineal family group members as well as to their allies in order to reinforce ties with villagers.

The interethnic pseudo-family functions as an exogamous entity. Besides, the adoption by a Lese of his Efe partner's daughter may later on lead to marriage. "A BaLese can acquire social alliances with other BaLese families or Efe groups through the marriage of his female *efe-maia* in the same way as his real sister or daughter's marriage establishes ties [...]" (Terashima, 1987: 79) "Both the Efe and the Lese people say that one must treat his partner just like one of the family. This corresponds with the notion that the partners in the alliance are considered to be related by something like kinship bonds." They call



**Fig. 6.** The adoption of an Efe woman by a Lese villager in northeast DRC (Terashima, 1987).



**Fig. 7.** Social alliances between a Balese and his pygmy relatives in northeast DRC (Terashima, 1987).

each other by classificatory kinship terms such as brother, sister, father, son or daughter (Terashima, 1986; Grinker, 1989). “The *efe maia* and *muta maia* regard each other to be related by a kinship tie similar to siblings or parent and child.” (Terashima, 1998: 124) “A BaLese cannot marry his female *efe-maia* ... It would be considered incestuous when the kinship framework is applied to their relationship.” (Terashima, 1987: 78)

In the framework of this type of interethnic relations, economic exchange of goods and services is not taking place in the context of a market but results from a particular ideology of a rather vague procedure which Hart (1978: 342; quoted by Terashima, 1986: 394) calls: "fluid give-and-take" in the absence of explicit negotiations and fixed prices. "The ideology of fictive kinship prescribes the nature of exchange between formal partners. It is based on generalised reciprocity rather than market principles. It is morally necessary to aid each other. When your partner requests something, you have to respond without any compensation. Economic reciprocation, however, is nonetheless important to maintain a

strong durable relationship. The solidarity would be threatened if you cannot reciprocate so much as your partner wants" (Terashima, 1998: 125).

On the other hand, economic exchange of goods and services do not necessarily respond to symbiotic needs from a socio-ecological point of view. Terashima (1987), quoting Putnam (1948), Schebesta (1933) and Waehle (1986), stresses the need to extend the model to other forms of exchange. As for the Baka Pygmies (Joiris, 1998), he underlines the role that this type of interethnic ties played during the pre-colonial period of war in creating alliances which lasted until the day of today. He equally reveals that the Pygmy received meat from the villagers...

"[... We] should widen the scope of the model to include elements other than the mere direct results of economic exchanges." (Terashima, 1987: 79) "...[The] eternal vigilance on the part of the Pygmy was probably of more value to his hosts than the meat that he brought in." (Putnam, 1948: 323, quoted by Terashima, 1987: 79) "These alliances are advantageous for the BaLese not only in time of war, mentioned by Putnam and Schebesta [...], but also often in times of peace, as at present." (Terashima, 1987: 79-80) "The farmer who has a Pygmy capable of frequently killing elephants is of course happy. But many farmers usually complain that their Pygmies are *bure* (useless). It is not surprising that a Pygmy does not bring any meat for a long time to his *muto-maia*. Occasionally he receives some meat from his *muto-maia* if the latter is a skilful trapper as well as a generous person." (Waehle, personal communication, quoted by Terashima, 1987: 79)

**Friendship** A second form of interethnic relationships maintained by the Baka, friendship, which, in an *emic* sense of the term, also generates relations of pseudo-kinship. Its characteristics (links between people of the same sex, possible transfer of the links to descendents) resemble in all ways those practised in the Ituri through temporary partnerships or barter-style exchange. This second type of relationship has also been identified by Terashima (1986; 1987; 1998) among the Efe, where it is established between temporary partners (and called '*emako* relationship' <sup>(1)</sup>). It provides room for exchange which functions much like barter trade and involves negotiations but within the framework of the ideology of the market.

**Ritual solidarity** The third type of relations maintained by the Baka people, are alliances of ritual solidarity between those co-initiated, generating, in an *emic* sense of the term, equally reciprocal obligations as strong as the ones between parents. The existence of interethnic relations based on ritual solidarity is not mentioned in the available literature on the Ituri. However, considering the fact that there are references about cases of common co-initiation between Pygmies and villagers in the region (Turnbull, 1983; Schebesta, 1933; 1936; 1937; 1952; Putnam, 1948; Bahuchet, 1989; Vansina, 1990; etc.), and that this automatically involves a series of obligations for life (particularly through '*kare* relationship' <sup>(2)</sup>), it is likely that ritual solidarity also exists among Mbuti/Efe Pygmies and villagers.

Thus, the comparison between Baka Pygmies and Mbuti/Efe Pygmies, who are culturally different and geographically far away from each other, reveals a number of similarities between the two areas (see Table 3). The most important aspects that appears in both situations relate to a) three links of the same order and b) the presence of the same type of siblings of the opposite sex within the pseudo-kinship bond.

**Table 3.** Synthesis of common pseudo-kinship bonds between Baka and Efe Pygmies.

Types of Bonds	Characteristics	Baka	Efe
<b>Pseudo-common family</b>		Various local terminologies	<i>Efe maia-muto maia</i> exchange system
	Temporary partnerships or barter-style exchange	xxx (virtual concordance)	xxx
	Common Pygmy and villager clans	xxx	xxx
	May be extended to relatives and siblings of both families	xxx	xxx
	Established between a Pygmy and villager couple as siblings of opposite sex	xxx	xxx
	Classificatory terminology used to address each other	xxx	xxx
	Inherited links	xxx	xxx
	Endogamy restrictions	xxx	xxxx
	Adoption allowed	xxx	xxx
	Inheritance of goods	xxx	
<b>Friendship</b>		Various local terminologies	<i>emako</i> relationship
	Established between a Pygmy and villager couple of the same sex	xxx	xxx
	May be inherited	xxx	xxx
	May involve exchange of women	xxx	
<b>Ritual solidarity</b>			<i>kare</i> relationship
	Co-initiations	xxx	xxx
	Exchange of women is prohibited	xxx	

## II. The Aspect of Subordination

Throughout the literature on the Congo Basin, Pygmies are said to be dominated by villagers for whom they work. The latter are referred to as “patrons” or “village masters” of the Pygmies. The relationship, however, is usually not considered one of slavery, with the exception of some Pygmy groups in Gabon. Bahuchet and Guillaume (1979: 123) write the following about the Aka Pygmies of Central African Republic: “The dependence of Pygmies [on villagers] can in no case be considered a form of slavery, a comparison sometimes made by the European colonizer following a false understanding of the interpretation the ‘Grands Noirs’ people (i.e. villagers) gave about their relation with Pygmies. There was no question of de-socialization or control of demographic and economic reproduction of Pygmies by their ‘masters’.

On the contrary, as Grinker (1989, 1990, 1994) notes about the relationship between Efe Pygmies and Lese villagers in the Ituri region, the inequality between the two groups can be better understood with reference to the socio-political organisation of the villager’s household in which the hierarchical ideology reflects individual ideals as articulated between Pygmies and villagers in the same way as it is articulated between men and women and between the old and the young.

Ambivalence is the main feature of the relationship. Even though Pygmies are described as being feared, denigrated, abused and exploited, relationships between the two communities continue in spite of important changes that could have led to their separation. Ichikawa (1991a, 1991b) demonstrated how this is the case for the Ituri. Direct involvement of Pygmies in the market and their subsequent economic independence did not lead to a separation of the two groups. Concerning the Twa Pygmies in the Great Lakes Region, Lewis (2000) pointed out how ethnic oppositions do not break down and even become more entrenched when segregation and discrimination increase. In the same way, deteriorating relationships between Pygmies and villagers, as well as an increase in ill treatment of Pygmies, led to individual ruptures and caused Pygmy families or camps to leave their villagers, but these do not cause the interethnic model to collapse.

### III. The same flexible organisation between Baka-Mbuti/Efe Pygmies and 'their' villagers

The final argument supporting a comparative analysis between Baka and Efe/Mbuti people is that the relational interactive models are characterised by the same flexible nature of dynamism.

As mentioned above, a Baka man can establish privileged relationships with villagers, six within the pseudo common family, one in the framework of friendship and four through ritual solidarity. In the same way, as an Efe man maintains privileged relations with different villagers, each Efe can establish at least two kinds of partnerships in different places. "Every Pygmy has at least one inherited villager partner, but he is not always able to exchange with the latter...When a Pygmy cannot find a *mutu maia* nearby, he usually tries to establish a regular exchange partnership with another friendly and generous farmer. Obviously this partnership [...] supplements the system [...] the repetition of barter style exchange often leads to the establishment of a regular partnership between the two persons." (Terashima, 1986: 396)

This bi-partite structure of economic exchange allows, through its flexibility, to satisfy the needs of both groups that find themselves in a situation of interdependence. "The first type of alliance through which all kinds of goods (and services) are exchanged in many different forms and which is characterised by institutionalised confidence, constitutes the basis of this system. The second, as it concerns an explicit exchange of a limited number of goods, is indeed a complementary element, but very important to the system [...]. Relations between the Efe and Lese owe their stability and efficacy to the bi-partite structure of the system." (Terashima, 1986: 405)

This exchange model is adjusted to two distinctive features of both Pygmy and villager forest communities; being conflict resolution inherent to acephalous political systems on the one hand, and continuous frequent individual mobility in spite of permanent settlement arrangement on the other. Avoidance as a method of conflict resolution is favoured as the partnership is not in any way formally restricted. The model is equally adjusted to frequent individual mobility, typical of both Pygmy and village communities, each individual weaving interethnic alliances within a network of relations between households. Regardless of whether the camp is permanent or temporary, during his visits, a Baka is

always able to be involved in an interethnic network of relations with privileged village partners.

Thus, quoting Terashima (1985: 402) about the Ituri: “Ambiguity, fluidity, or flexibility do not undermine the system. Rather, in this case, they make the system more effective and profitable for both Mbuti and farmers. The flexibility of the behavioural system in a foraging hunter-gatherer society does not mean chaos but rather it is a crucial component of the system.”

## INTERPRETATIONS ABOUT THE ORIGIN OF INTERETHNIC RELATIONS

The literature about interethnic relation between Pygmies and villagers provides more detailed information with regard to their origins and their functioning than about their framework. Generally, four tendencies can be identified: a socio-political, ideological<sup>(3)</sup>, economic and ecological interpretation. The first focuses on the ambivalent model as presented above. The other interpretations essentially analyse one single aspect of interethnic relations: subordination and domination (although economic complementarity is also addressed).

### I. The socio-political interpretation of the origin of the ambivalent model based on solidarity and subordination

Interethnic relations are analysed in light of the socio-political organisation of the villagers. Within the framework of Pygmy and villager households as socio-political units, analyses have been developed from a synchronic perspective (Grinker, 1989, 1994), and from a more ethno-historical viewpoint (Joiris, 1998a, 1998b). Although both studies follow a similar sociological and political analysis, they don't deal with the same subject and they are based on different methodologies. Concerning the Ituri, Grinker focuses his analysis on the model of interethnic inequality in regard to the hierarchy within the farmer households. He attributes importance to the isolated aspect of household organisation and does not consider the kinship organisation. Concerning Southeast Cameroon, I have focused my analysis on the model of interethnic solidarity. I have identified alliances of solidarity as a basis of interethnic relations in regard to pseudo-kinship bonds between Pygmy and farmer households. I have not described aspects of inequality in interethnic relationships.

The results of the two studies are therefore different. However, they also reflect parts of the same contradictory reality. Grinker shows that the relation between Pygmies and villagers can be seen as an ensuing manifestation of similar kinds of subordination; of women by men and of youth by the elders within villager households. I clarify that interethnic relations are the result of pre-colonial warrior alliances as well as of the influence of power dynamics exercised by the villager “big men.”

**Table 4.** Socio-political approaches to interethnic relations.

	Efe (Grinker)	Baka (Joiris)
Relationship	<i>Subordination</i>	<i>Solidarity</i>
<b>Methodology</b>	Relationships within villager's household; Synchronic perspective	Relationships between pygmy and villager's households; Diachronic perspective
<b>Results</b>	Ideology of hierarchy; Socio-political organisation	Ideology of solidarity; Pseudo-kinship links
<b>Interpretation</b>	Manifestation of subordination of women by men and youth by elderly within village households	Continuity of pre-colonial warrior alliances; Result of the influence of power dynamics exercised by the village <i>big men</i>

## II. Other interpretations of the origin of interdependence and subordination relations

### 1. *Ideological interpretation*

Basically developed by Bahuchet and Guillaume (1979; 1982) as well as by Bahuchet (1989; 1993), the main idea of this interpretation is that through such expressions as oral traditions, the history of interethnic relations between the two groups becomes evident and the villagers' subordination of Pygmies is legitimised. The analysis rests on oral traditions, i.e. expressions of constructed representations which Aka Pygmies and neighbouring populations have about their identities and the nature of their relation. "These images emanate from everyday life, political and economic realities of contact between peoples, and do not constitute a simple justification of the latter but are one of the conditions of their formation as well." In this context, it is appropriate to further "investigate the identity attributed to each party in the imagination of the other as a contributing factor for establishing relationships and defining their nature (Bahuchet & Guillaume, 1979: 111, 113)."

Bahuchet and Guillaume's analysis considers constructed representation by both villagers and Pygmies concerning their respective identities, and the nature of their relationship. In most oral traditions of neighbouring villagers (to Aka, Baka and Mbuti peoples), the ancient Pygmy are, at the beginning, regarded as savages and isolated in a world of nature - the forest - next to the animals and dark forces. In a second period, the ancient Pygmies are presented as having "a civilising role (inventing fire, adopting cooked food, metallurgy and cultivation of plants)" and/or "a rescue function (leading migrations, accessing resources, initiating the forest environment)" in regard to the ancient villagers who are classified as belonging to a world of culture, the village. Finally, in a third period, Pygmies are presented as accessing humanity only by stealing or sharing with villagers the attributes of culture. They are depicted as "semantically opposed to humans [...] or to villagers [...]" and they are considered as [...] taking an intermediary position; they

are perceived somewhere between the world of humans and animals [...]. The status and capacities ascribed to them in the constructed representation of the 'Grands Noirs', are characterised by "ambivalence." (Bahuchet & Guillaume, 1979: 113-114)

According to such analysis, oral traditions should not be interpreted as reflecting an initial state of subordination as there is no evidence of such in early socio-economic relations linking the two parties. Rather it should be interpreted as highlighting the impact of historical reality on co-habitation between Pygmies and villagers and the confrontation of two contradictory socio-economic systems. At the time of the encounter between Pygmies and villagers, "constructed representations [legitimised] not only existing relations which, following a division of labour, allowed the 'Grands Noirs' to concentrate on essentially cultural specialised activities (metallurgy, agriculture), but also relations of dependency which were still non established, at a project level, to be constructed..." (Bahuchet & Guillaume, 1979: 117) These representations would justify the present exploitation of Pygmies by villagers. As Pygmies are considered semantically opposed to humans, they are de-humanised and can therefore be abused and exploited.

## 2. *Economic interpretation*

According to this interpretation, the Pygmy's economic and cultural dependence on the village people is rooted in the villager's technological superiority in metallurgy and agriculture. Illustrated notably by Bahuchet and Guillaume (1979) in their studies about the Aka, Baka and Mbuti, as well as by Turnbull (1966) and Harako (1976) about the Mbuti, the analysis is based on a historical reconstruction of socio-economic relations between Pygmies and villagers (see also Vansina, 1990), analysing the effects of proximity without including studies on inter-ethnic relations.

The evolution of socio-economic relationship (particularly economic) between the two groups, since their first contacts at the time of the great migrations (2400 – 500 BC) until today is reconstructed. The analysis postulates the existence of "ancient partnerships between camps and village lineages (or their segments)." "The traditional 'Pygmy master' acted as a privileged intermediary to obtain iron (introduced around the beginning of the Christian era) and also agricultural products in exchange for products from the forest and magic hunting techniques. The 'village masters' [...] did not [own] the Pygmy but [made them] dependent by monopolising [access to] metallurgy and agriculture [...]" (Bahuchet & Guillaume, 1979: 123, 136)."

The initially economic symbiotic relationship became progressively unbalanced for the Pygmies following the introduction of new economic dynamics, including trade with the Portuguese in the 16th century, colonial treatment after 1890. "The 'Grands Noirs', from then on, in addition to technological superiority (metallurgy, pottery), took up an intermediary role [with new commercial markets], which became stronger at the expense of most of the [Pygmy people]." "The services expected from the Pygmy relied less and less on their traditions and knowledge of the forest [...]. From the initial system of exchanging game and gathered products for iron and agricultural products, a new system emerges of exchanging work for food, manufactured objects, European consumer goods and money [...]. This tendency [...] takes different forms and is more or less determined by the identity and the situation of the peoples, even the villages [...]. At the same time the Pygmies were included in agricultural production, they also continued to exploit the forest on their own behalf and for their 'masters' [...]. Thus, the initial relation of dependence, based



on acquiring manufactured goods produced in a more developed technical environment conditioned by access to the networks of exchange, becomes considerably enlarged by a new dependence on food production. [...] These constraints are reinforced by the weight of a pre-existing situation of dependence ... Pygmies become involved in other sectors of the economy of the 'Grands Noirs' [...] Their new situation goes hand in hand with a disintegration of former alliances. Their contacts diversify; the traditional 'master' remains a privileged go-between, all villagers become potential employers (Bahuchet & Guillaume, 1979: 124, 133-136)."

Although based on the same kind of economic argument, that point of view is contested by Klieman (1995, 1997) for whom neither the knowledge of metallurgy nor of cultivation necessarily led to the domination of the Pygmies. According to her historical linguistic data, there is no evidence for dating Pygmies' dependence during the period of the Bantu settlement. Moreover, she argues that it is only when trade networks expanded (from the late fifteenth century AD) that economic specialisation led to increased reliance of forest specialists on neighbouring agriculturalists and also led to more-or-less balanced social and economic relations. According to her, the emergence of domination occurred particularly for hunter-gatherer populations who had not developed a hierarchical political structure that would have allowed them to enter the markets and who had to accept an incorporation into the production system.

### 3. *Ecological interpretation*

According to the ecological interpretation, close relationships between Pygmies and villagers have been conditioned by environmental constraints: insufficient availability of wild plants of rich nutritional value causing dependence of hunter-gatherers on farmers. A synthetic description of a system of interdependence between hunters (producers of proteins) and farmers (producers of calories) is given by Bailey et al. (1989). In the absence of sufficient archaeological data, the argument is based on the comparison of a contemporary use of cultivated starch and wild plants in a forest with the time when Pygmy and villager ancestors penetrated the forest. It presumes one of the principles of cultural ecology, according to which what is used corresponds to what is available.

This interpretation has been criticised by Bahuchet et al. (1991) which attests that Pygmy peoples were perfectly able to survive in a forest environment before the arrival of farmers, that contemporary wild food plants (like wild yams) are less available in the forest environment that they used to have been in the past, and that the relation of dependency is in fact the result of the superior technology of the ancient villagers. Similar results have been obtained by other researchers such as Ichikawa (1983, 1991a, 1991b) for the Mbuti and Sato (2001) for the Baka.

Following the hypothesis of calorie deficiency presented by Bailey et al. (1989), early contact between hunter-gatherers and farmers hundreds of years ago served as an appropriate strategy in response to environmental constraints. In reality, wild plants with rich nutritional value would have been too rare in tropical forests to allow hunter-gatherers to maintain an independent life from farmers. Supporters of this hypothesis therefore deny the possibility for Pygmy peoples to survive by hunting and gathering before the introduction of cultivated plants. They suggest that the Pygmies entered the forest accompanied by migrants from the savannah with the crops brought from the Malay plants complex (plantain and taro). This idea is based on contemporary observations, applying historical

**Table 5.** Interpretations of the relation of subordination between Pygmies and villagers.

	<b>Socio-Political Approach</b>	<b>Ideological Approach</b>	<b>Economic Approach</b>	<b>Ecological Approach</b>
<b>Main References</b>	Grinker 1989, 1994; Bahuchet & Joiris 1998a, 1998b; Rupp 2001	Bahuchet & Guillaume 1979, 1982; Bahuchet 1989, 1993	Bahuchet & Guillaume 1979, 1982; Harako 1976; Turnbull 1966; Vansina 1990; Klieman 1995, 1997	Bailey et al. 1989; Bahuchet et al. 1991
<b>Causes of initial inter-dependence</b>			Technological superiority of the villagers (metallurgy and agriculture)	Unavailability of wild plants with high nutritional value
<b>Causes for continuing subordination</b>	Reflecting the socio-political organisation system of villager's households	Legitimised by the political organisation system of representation that reflects subjugation		
<b>Sources</b>	Historico-sociological case studies	Oral tradition	History, archeology, linguistics	Ecology, history

parallelism with the invasion of the eastern Negratic and Bantu farmers (Murdock, 1959) and the diffusion of crops.

Bahuchet et al. (1991) refute this idea. According to them, close and ancient relations between hunter-gatherers and farmers were established, not as a result of a lack of nutritious wild foods from the forest, but rather because of a progressive loss of knowledge about these wild resources due to easy access and distribution of cultivated plants leading to their preferred and frequent use. This interpretation is based on ecological, archaeological, ethnohistorical (cf. Vansina, 1990) and ethnolinguistic data which show that Pygmy hunter-gatherers in the western Congo basin have lived in the tropical forest before the arrival of the farmers and that they mastered a vast amount of knowledge and techniques about gathering food plants and hunting wild animals.

There are numerous accounts of the origins of Pygmies/villagers relationships in the relevant literature. The interpretations are not mutually exclusive and some authors draw on one or more interpretations. There are nonetheless two dominant statements (see Table 5). The economic and ecological approach emphasises the causes of relationship of “interdependence.” The socio-political and ideological approach emphasises the causes of relations of “subordination.” For the former, the Pygmies/villagers interdependent relationship can be explained by technological superiority of the “Bantu” or the existence of commercial relations. For the latter, subordination is explained by a hierarchical organisation within the villager’s household or by the presence of an ideology of domination.

Data supporting these different interpretations emanate from widely different disciplines. They are case studies (socio-political approach), oral tradition (ideological approach), history, archaeology and linguistics (economic approach) or history and ecology

**Table 6.** Periods presumably relevant to the analysis and interpretation of interethnic relationships

	Present and Recent Past	Deep Past 2500 to 500 B.C. -
<b>Pre-colonial and Contemporary Period (19th century)</b>	Socio-Political Approach	
<b>Period of the trade networks expansion (from the late fifteenth century)</b>	Economic Approach	
<b>First contacts between ancestors of Pygmies and villagers</b>	Ideological Approach	Ideological Approach
<b>Introduction of iron and agriculture</b>		Economic Approach
<b>Penetration of the forest by ancestors of Pygmies and villagers</b>		Ecological Approach

(ecological approach). Some of these sources (mainly archaeological, but also ecological and linguistic) correspond with hypothesis elaborated from the materials (such as cut stone, plants from modified ecosystem or lexical terms) which are historically de-contextualised. Given this double interpretation constraint, the analysis of contemporary interethnic relation remains largely speculative.

Finally, as presented in the Table 6, these different interpretations about the origin of the relation may represent the relations in different periods in history. The socio-economic analysis broaches the question about the relationship of the relatively recent time, the 19th century at the earliest. The other three (ideological, economic and ecological) cover a more distant past, around the beginning of the Christian era, following the invasion of the villagers' ancestors, the diffusion of the crops from the Malay complex, the introduction of iron and metallurgy, and the trade network extension.

## CONCLUSIONS

An epistemological reflective analysis of the relations between Pygmy and villager communities in the Congo River basin expose four different types of analysis: socio-political, ideological, economic and ecological. The socio-political analysis is the only one founded on case studies. It describes the framework of the interethnic relation (in terms of solidarity and subordination), as well as presenting an interpretation of its origin. We have seen that other analyses a) describe interethnic relations (in terms of partners strategies) and/or b) seek to interpret the origin of the interethnic relation but essentially in terms of subordination and without documented analysis of the interethnic framework. Indeed, those contemporary interethnic relations have rarely been the subject of case studies.

If we embrace the hypothesis that relations between Pygmies and villagers correspond to a contradictory model and is the outcome of both an ideology of solidarity (through pseudo-kinship) and of an ideology of subordination (relations of power and domination over Pygmies by villagers), it can be concluded that the literature provides more detail about the dimension of subordination than about solidarity. In the absence of knowledge of the interethnic framework, the scientific discourse reflects what researchers think about its origins. The ideological, economic and ecological hypotheses favour the subordination aspect of the relationship.

The emphasis that the literature places on interethnic exchanges, manipulations, strategies and ideas, representations of relations between Pygmies and villagers has also been addressed in this paper. Even though these descriptions are useful in understanding ethnic relations, it seems difficult to interpret them from an *emic* point of view (they are consequently essentially *etic*), because the structure of the relationship has not been sufficiently identified at the outset. From a methodological viewpoint, the socio-political framework of the Pygmies-villagers relationship needs to be based on in-depth historical-sociological case studies. We need to take into account the point of view of both Pygmies and villagers. We need to address both the aspects of solidarity and inequality in the relationship, and also to take into account two levels of discourse: the normative and the pragmatic. Nonetheless, according to ethnographic case studies, similarities are found between geographically and culturally distant regions - southeastern Cameroon and northeastern DRC - as well as among other Pygmy groups in the available literature, which leads to the conclusion that a common system may apply to all the Pygmy and neighbouring farmer groups in the entire Congo River basin.

In order to sustain this hypothesis, similarities in the relationship need to be identified. In my view, an essential common feature between the Baka and Mbuti/Efe cases is the flexibility of the interethnic relationship. Indeed, both the Baka and Mbuti/Efe have the same kind of flexible social relationships. Bonds of pseudo-kinship, much more diverse than kinship relations based on consanguinity and affinity, facilitate an extensive network of potential pseudo-kin partners, safeguarding complex relationships based on different alliances in various locations. Flexibility is an essential element of interethnic relations, but in which environment does it operate most effectively? Is the model specific to nomadic hunter-gatherers in relation to their sedentary neighbours? Or, is it characteristic of only African Pygmy communities?

Indeed, most nomadic hunter-gatherers maintain a series of complex interethnic relations with neighbouring peoples (Bird-David, 1988; Woodburn, 1988; 1997; Headland & Lawrence, 1989; Blench, 1999; Vierich, 1982). Their models, however, seem to be of a different type. The interethnic ties between Agta hunter-gatherers of the Philippines and their neighbours the Puni, for example, - *ibay* described by Peterson (1978)-, are based on only one type of the bonds, not three, unlike the cases of the Baka and Mbuti/Efe. A further comparative analysis of the interethnic framework should be conducted before concluding to what extent the described model is specific to African Pygmy communities.

Another important similarity between the Baka and Mbuti/Efe peoples is the mobility and acephalous political organisation. I argue that the interethnic relational model and its "fluid" character perfectly fit the contingencies of the socio-political environment. The model presented here, therefore, would only apply to Pygmy groups in contact with

villager communities, that are also characterised by mobility and by a non-hierarchical political organisation.

The principal argument sustaining this is that the relational model presented here, at least for the Baka, is applicable to both intra-ethnic (villager-villager, Pygmy-Pygmy) and interethnic (Pygmy-villager) relationships. It functions in a context where all the communities, including the villagers, are people who used to be nomads or semi-nomads and who, despite the sedentary settlements, have maintained frequent mobility through the institutional visits and seasonal or cyclic displacements (seasonal for exploiting the forest resources, cyclic for performing multiple services to which individuals are subjected for life). Following such established relational modalities, the individuals can, at any time, maintain one or more “privileged” relationships of the three types of pseudo-kinship bonds described earlier in this paper.

In addition, the fluid character of interethnic relations fit a political organisation that also depends on mobility - not in space, this time, but statutory or institutionally - for which a multiplicity of partnerships, non-centralised and non-hierarchical relationships need to be established. In such a relationship, everybody is implicated through strings of horizontal alliances (between pseudo-affines) and vertical (between pseudo-kins) alliances. It is therefore likely that the model only works in acephalous societies and that other Pygmy communities in contact with hierarchical societies might have adopted a different relational interethnic model.

In summary, the special feature of the interethnic relational model between Pygmy people and “acephalous” neighbouring villagers reside in the multiple (three) bonds between them and the adaptation to an environment of spatial and statutory multiplicity. Thus, understanding “interethnic relational landscape” in Central Africa will certainly be enhanced by studying and comparing the relationships between Pygmy peoples and local neighbours with a non-hierarchical and a hierarchical political structure.

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## NOTES

- (1) Terashima, personal communication.
- (2) Terashima, personal communication.
- (3) Ideological is used here as a neutral acceptance of “systems of representation.”

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